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Introduction

The Cuban musical field is today a place of contention. While prestigious voices within popular music such as Juan Formell¹ complain about the lack of interest of young musicians in “our music,” meaning “Cuban popular dance music,” there is a group of young musicians, mostly amateurs, who are striving to have reggaeton considered as part of that field. This is no easy task, especially when intellectuals and high-ranking cultural officials perceive reggaeton as a “threat” to the “wave of vitality that is Cuban music.”²

Reggaeton, as other genres that preceded it, has generated anxiety among musicologists, intellectuals, and musicians themselves concerning the boundaries and the monopolization of “legitimate culture.” However, what is at stake does not pertain only to the musical arena. Reggaeton’s characteristics and success are deeply linked to the emergent values of a Cuban underclass and the rising ideology of consumerism in the country, as I will discuss in this article. I use the concept of emergent values (Williams 1990; 2005) to direct the attention toward the potential new elements that usually appear at the margins of society and are themselves manifestations of change. Since they are sometimes in a state of pre-emergence, they find in popular culture and music a space to surface and confront dominant culture. The symbolic distinctions played out in the Havana reggaeton scene that I discussed in this text underscore two of such elements: the rearticulation of class and the increasing role of money in adjudicating social status in contemporary Cuba.

My intention is to dissect reggaeton through various lenses, particularly trying to account for its social connections/mediations. A scene approach provides the conceptual framework to conceive Cuban reggaeton as a complex sociocultural local and trans-local space (Bennett 2004a) in which musicians, critics, and audiences engage in practices of boundary-definition (Cohen 1991; Straw 1991; Lena and Peterson 2008). In that sense, the article underscores the underlying causes behind the wave of moral panic provoked by this genre and highlights how reggaetoneros have understood and counteracted this situation by producing a music that could be perceived as more “Cuban.”

I also relate reggaeton to the discussion on social change in Cuba. The text considers how reggaeton provides a gendered response to current changes in the dynamic of romantic relations due to the impact of sex tourism. I also argue that one of the main reasons this genre has been so criticized is because of its insistence on money, conspicuous consumption, and class distinction. These traits reveal the existence of emergent values and alternative structures of feeling that contradict state ideology in a very direct way. I highlight the linkage of reggaeton to a rising Cuban underclass whose values and subjectivities challenge the hegemony of socialist

ideology. I will argue that what makes this genre more problematic is its projection of a different social subject whose values, discourses, and life experiences are profoundly disconnected from the revolutionary ethos.

However, this is not a homological relation between one genre and a class subculture. On the contrary, through an analysis of lyrics, interviews with reggaetoneros, and ethnographic work in performance venues, I illustrate the complex, multi-layered negotiation of identity in the reggaeton scene in Havana. This genre will be shown to articulate broader cultural trends which allow for different (class, race, gender, global) identities to be enacted. I hope to demonstrate with the reggaeton case that a “rearticulation of scenes to social class” (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 30) can be maintained in the analysis without necessarily reducing a music genre to a symbolic reproduction of a specific class, as implied in theories of homology.

Noise in the System: Reggaeton and Moral Panic

It is commonly held by scholars and musicians alike that reggaeton entered the country through Oriente at the beginning of this decade, especially in the provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo, which are closer to Jamaica and Puerto Rico and could probably receive their radio signals (Baker 2009; Boudreault-Fournier 2008).³ Later, former rap groups such as Cubanito 2002, started producing reggaeton in Havana. Most Cuban reggaeton has been produced in home-based studios and distributed by street sellers because record companies have paid little attention to this genre. The diffusion of this music in the capital increased due to the circulation of CDs and mp3 tracks through an informal music economy network. *Merolicos* [street vendors], *bicitaxistas* [bicycle-taxi drivers, usually migrants from the eastern provinces], and private taxi drivers or *boteros* played a key role in its dissemination, especially its most underground and censored examples. These and similar subjects are bitterly criticized by a prominent radio and TV director: “The sound technicians, the people who hit the play button in the markets, the bicitaxistas, are not media people, nor critics nor specialists in anything, but are greatly influential in the diffusion of bad taste. . . .”⁴

Bad taste, the “bad taste” of the lower classes, has been associated by many Cuban musicologists, journalists, and media professionals with reggaeton. For example, in the CIDMUC’s (2005) report, reggaeton is criticized for its vulgar, obscene lyrics—just as *timba* was in the 1990s. Indeed, the first waves of underground reggaeton contained strong language, especially with sexual connotations.⁵ A quick glance at two compilations with almost one hundred video clips made between 2011 and 2012 which I bought from a street vendor, reveals that the overwhelming majority of the songs use sexuality as its central theme, with language and visual codes that in

no less measure come from porn. Porn is forbidden in Cuba but circulates informally and the whole construction of male hypersexuality in reggaeton, an issue I will address later in detail, heavily relies on light porn conventions. The video “Ellas son locas” [Those girls are crazy] by Chacal and Yakarta, features women in topless and certain scenes insinuating a lesbian relation. Most videos sexually objectify women to an extent unseen in Cuban popular music whereas the language of sexual intercourse is also typical in the genre.

José Luis Cortés, El Tosco, a timba musician who was once heavily criticized for the language of “La Bruja” (BisMusic, 1995), expressed with some irony that

because they wanted to displace this movement [timba], they got into something worse, a foreign music, that is, the famous reggaeton, with bloody lyrics [. . .] The literature of timba’s lyrics is not even close to what these kids are doing, so it backfired on them and the people from the Ministry of Culture, from the Institute of Music do not know what to do about it.⁶

From around 2004, various newspaper articles,⁷ declarations by officials of cultural institutions,⁸ and informal media policies⁹ constructed a “crusade” against reggaeton. One of the radio directors I interviewed at the beginning of my fieldwork bluntly expressed that at some level he associated reggaeton with “delinquent attitudes [. . .] there has to be a limit, because even Van Van has played with puns but there is moderation, this does not mean that all reggaeton is the same, but sometimes I see it as an invasion of the established or traditional ethics.”¹⁰

As noted by Jesus Martín Barbero (1980: 19), behind those opinions usually hide intellectuals who too frequently mask our class tastes behind political labels that allow us to reject mass culture in the name of the alienation it produces, when actually that rejection is directed to the class that likes that culture, to its different vital experience, “vulgar” and noisy.

It is precisely such “pleasure of marginalized people that has evaded channelization” (McClary and Walser 1990: 245) that is reframed as hints of “vulgarity” in recurrent waves of moral panic and criticism. The concept of moral panic comes from the sociology of deviance and it was first coined by Stanley Cohen (1972) in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* to address how the media and different community actors created negative public images of British mobs and rockers. These campaigns usually deployed “‘quality’ culture as a means of moral, and by implication social, elevation” (Drotner 1992: 49). Shuker (1994: 270) remarks that the concept has been used to describe hostile reactions to some musical genres such as rock and rap and dismiss youth subcultures. Underlying such conflicts are concerns around

the control of youth behaviors and, in particular, of certain class groups (Frith 2007: 173). In her analysis of the moral panic provoked by reggaeton in Puerto Rico, Raquel R. Rivera (2009: 112) observes precisely how censorship of forms of popular culture serves “to cement power relations, social prejudices and structures of oppression.”

Moral panics related to Cuban popular dance music are not new. Musician José Luis Cortés believes that “dance music has always been marginalized.”¹¹ Beyond elitism, Robin Moore (2006) has observed a “puritanical attitude” towards dance and music in socialist societies. Culture needs to edify rather than entertain. This author also speculates on how much of this attitude is due to a suspicion about the “rebelliousness implicit in popular music, the fact that much of its pleasure derives from the transgression of [. . .] norms of various kinds” (Moore 2006: 107). In addition, he argues that historically, the government’s lack of support for dance music has also been influenced by a “bias against an expression associated with poorer Black communities that it considered simplistic or backward” (Moore 2006: 133). This opens up to question the extent to which reggaeton’s rejection in Cuba implies a disdain to music perceived as racially charged, as Samponaro (2009) has noted in the Puerto Rican case.

The fact that most reggaetoneros are amateurs has also fuelled fears of the de-professionalization of music and thus, loss of quality, especially when compared to the musical complexity of timba (Baker 2009). Underground reggaetoneros have been called pseudo-artists (García 2009: 4), and the public has been criticized for undergoing an involution.¹² However, behind many criticisms by *timberos* and other musicians, there is a real concern of losing in the music market. Indeed, a quick glance at the shows in clubs and discos in the past three years revealed that reggaeton had an overwhelming presence and that it was displacing timba orchestras. David Calzado himself, director of the popular timba band Charanga Habanera, stated that “timba is not in its best moment.”¹³

Economically speaking, reggaetoneros benefit from the regulations prohibiting first class timba and traditional orchestras to perform in top hotels, in which many discos are located. Furthermore, reggaetoneros can earn more per capita since groups do not usually exceed four people. Frank Palacios, a formally trained musician—which makes him an exception—and music producer of the reggaeton group Los Cuatro,¹⁴ provides two additional reasons—one musical and one practical—for the current advantaged position of reggaeton in relation to timba. First, dancing salsa requires space to do the turns but reggaeton can be danced almost standing in place. Second,

A reggaeton song starts with a chorus and quickly there comes a counter-chorus. People who go dancing do not want to listen to 26 bars with nice

lyrics, as happens with salsa, but from the start, they want to dance. If they can only dance two minutes in a song of five, they would rather go to a theatre to see you but they will not pay a high entrance fee [cover]. That is the thing with reggaeton, that from very beginning, you can dance to it.¹⁵

However, the sustained popularity of the genre suggests that the campaign has not achieved a great impact on its audiences. It also points to the effectiveness of the alternative networks of distribution in which reggaeton CDs can be easily acquired or copied. On the other hand, reggaetoneros are pushing to be accepted through their attempts to “Cubanize” the genre as a mode to stop reggaeton “being perceived as Puerto Rican and hence, a colonising music.”¹⁶

According to Baker (2009: 177), “for all that reggaeton dance holds the power to scandalize and counterrevolutionize, it seems to be in the sphere of bodily movement that the transformative capacity of Cuban culture—Cubanization—is most in evidence.” However, his perception overlooks the increasing pressures on both established musicians and young reggaetoneros to fuse reggaeton with Cuban music. According to the account of Frank Palacios, Fernando Otero [a.k.a. Nando Pro], music producer of Gente de Zona, started fusing reggaeton with Cuban music in songs such

FIGURE 1. *Los Cuatro* (COURTESY OF FRANK PALACIOS).



as “Soñé” [I dreamed] and “La Palestina” [The Palestinian] both recorded in *Lo mejor que suena ahora V 2.0* (Planet Records, 2008). Palacios made similar efforts in songs such as “Conmigo no, con Puerto Rico” [Not with me, with Puerto Rico] (*Intocables Vol. II*, Independent production, 2009), and “Ahora, ¿cómo te mantienes?” [And now, how do you keep on top?] performed by Los Cuatro (*Escucha lo que traje*, Planet Records, 2009).

Timberos themselves are increasingly interested in joint ventures with reggaetoneros. Charanga Habanera recorded with Eddy K and later with Gente de Zona despite the fact that Calzado said that he never conceived of making reggaeton:

I do not think that you need such a big band to make something you could do with a few people. If I had to make reggaeton, I would keep two singers and a machine. I am not going to use a super band to make something that is a bit of a fantasy, because in reggaeton the performance is all machine-based, singers sing on top of recorded voices, everything is a fantasy.¹⁷

According to Calzado, it was both Eddy K and Gente de Zona who manifested their interest in recording with La Charanga, although the mutual benefits were obvious. La Charanga would share their stardom and legitimation with reggaetoneros while capitalizing on their massive popularity. Nonetheless, the sustained popularity of reggaeton might have changed Calzado's previous ideas. The hit “Gozando en La Habana” [Enjoying Havana] (*No mires la Caratula*, Planet Records, 2009) is a curious hybrid of recorded and live instruments and represents a further step in the collaboration between timberos and reggaetoneros—the theme is the result of the co-work of La Charanga and Los Cuatro.

In fact, Frank Palacios believes that a distinctive Cuban reggaeton exists and that the common criticisms about reggaeton being too simple are becoming just a cliché. While the efforts to nationalize reggaeton may respond to a conscious attempt to counterbalance criticisms against the “foreign” sonic aspects of the genre and thus attract state support in terms of legal artistic representation and access to performing venues,¹⁸ the local appropriation and transformation of a global sound is not new to Cuban musicians. In that respect, Palacios points out that reggaeton, like other genres in Cuban music history, has undergone a process of “transculturation” and as such, has fused with Cuban instruments and “rhythmic cells” [células rítmicas]. Among the instruments he used to achieve a distinctive Cuban sound, there are

the piano, a classic in the music arrangements of Cuban orchestras; the violins used in *charanga* orchestras; *tumbadoras*, *güiros* and above all,

orchestration with brass instruments such as trombones and trumpets, which I usually record with live musicians and then insert into the tracks.¹⁹

Currently, most reggaetoneros speak of Cubatón, as a (sub)genre of its own. The process of Cubanization is central to the recognition of reggaeton as part of national culture, which might open many key doors to performers and contribute to the end of the negative campaign against the genre. Actually, some reggaeton groups are making it into the media, in prime time TV shows such as *23 y M* and *La Descarga*. However, this does not measure up to the level of promotion or support granted to officially sanctioned genres or musicians. On the other hand, the Cubanization of reggaeton might have its limits as a cultural strategy. The most successful reggaetoneros such as Gente de Zona, Baby Loes, Los Cuatro, and Osmany García make most of their profit by touring abroad, especially to Europe, where audiences might not be that familiar with the sonic complexities proposed in Cubatón. Above all, the nationalization of reggaeton as a strategy seeking acceptance is probably not enough to counteract other problematic reggaeton features for the public eye.

In 2011, the moral panic reached a new peak when the video of the song “El Chupi Chupi” by Osmany García—featuring some of the most popular local reggaetoneros—was transmitted in the television show *Lucas* and was voted through SMS the “most popular video” in the *Lucas* competition—although it was eventually pulled off. The title of the song is code for oral sex but also how lollipops are known in the island. In a perverse twist, the video used children-like imaginary of candy and lollipops while reggaetoneros were using blatant sexual language. Children all over the country were singing: “Dame un chupi chupi, abre la bocuti, trágatelo tutti” [Give me a blowjob, open your mouth and swallow it all]. That was too much. Explicit criticism of the “Chupi Chupi” appeared in the official newspaper *Granma* and in the no less official television program *Mesa Redonda*. The media was the one to blame for airing content with no artistic or ethical values. But the final question posed in Professor María Cordova’s (2011: 5) article in *Granma* implies that criticisms of reggaeton go beyond issues of taste or cultural value: “What project of future is proposed by those who create, perform, distribute, promote and generalized such unpleasant, vulgar and aberrant forms of expression?”

The intolerance against reggaeton is not only a moral question or a fear of a threat coming from a global sound, as in the case of pop rock analyzed above. There are other political reasons motivating the official crackdown on reggaeton. Interestingly enough, reggaeton critics see the genre as a musically impoverished form (De La Hoz 2006), resulting from neoliberalism and its “light” culture intruding into the country (Martínez 2009). What such criticisms suggest is that what is at stake is not just music; it is

the configuration of a new type of social/political subject—the underclass subject—and its evident political disconnection from socialist values. It is to this issue that I now turn.

Reggaeton, Underclass, and Emergent Values

Reggaeton is already a subject of study. Two articles in the recently published compilation *Reggaeton* (Marshall, Pacini, and Rivera 2009) address Cuban reggaeton. Whereas Jan Fairley (2009) focuses on the pornographic meanings attached to reggaeton dancing, especially to those movements connected to the “doggy style” or *perreo*, Geoff Baker (2009) offers a detailed account of the conflictive relationship between rap and reggaeton that marked the emergence of the latter in the island. Following McClary’s ideas, Baker (2009: 177) also claims that in the Cuban context, the body “might be perceived as a prime articulator of free ‘speech’ in a context in which ideas and verbal expression are subjected to regulation by the state.” For Baker, the common references to sex and the body in the lyrics are not “evidence of its inconsequentiality” but rather a sign of how young *habaneros* “are reinventing the body as a site of pleasure, personal gain, and social mobility rather than productive, collective labor. It is also a refusal to engage with the state’s preferred terms, at the level of ideology and articulated discourse” (2009: 177).

This is a very illuminating argument; still, the importance given to dance should not go along with a quick dismissal of reggaeton lyrics and discourse, which, I argue, offer a compelling portrayal of the emergent values and worldviews in certain sectors of Cuban youth. In that sense, reggaeton has become a strong cultural expression of a growing Cuban underclass.

Although the concept of underclass originated in a different context—that of late capitalist societies—and has been controversial in its interpretation,²⁰ I will adopt it as mean of exploring similar patterns in Cuba of “structural downward mobility for substantial sections of”—in this case—the Cuban working class, “as well as a set of structural social places into which large numbers of [internal] immigrants flow” (Lash and Urry 1994: 145). I want to stress that it is this structural perspective (Robinson and Gregson 1992) that I found most useful in reclaiming this concept here. Since it connects race, class, and urban inequalities to social change, similarly, it can illuminate the re-articulation of such inequalities during the crisis in Cuba and the consequences for particular social groups.

Both the economic crisis and the reforms implemented to cope with it have triggered processes of social re-stratification (Dilla 2002) and “inequalities in the country and in the city have experienced an intense widening process [. . .] the strip of urban poverty reaches a proportion of 20%” (Espina 2004: 121).²¹ Yet, with few exceptions, Cuban scholars would rather

avoid using the language of class. Although there are a few studies dealing with the category of “poverty”—for example Zabala (2010) and Rodríguez, Estévez, and Canet (2004)—they evade treating class as a dependent variable (Lash and Urry 1994: 149) to see how the convergence of structural, cultural, and historical factors has produced a new disadvantaged lower class or underclass connected to the social changes of the last two decades.

For instance, academics invited to a debate hosted by the social science journal *Temas* downplayed economic factors and concentrated on marginality, which was defined, in practice, as the cultural and behavioral aspects associated to economic exclusion or poverty (Valdés Paz et al., 2001). Poverty and marginality were treated as different phenomena and distinction was made between “exclusion due to structural factors . . . and marginality as a cultural product” (Mayra Espina in Valdés Paz et al., 2001: 77). Marginality then, is said to work as subjectivity centred on survival and characterized by presentism (Martin in Valdés Paz 2001: 71). Other participants in the *Temas* debate stressed that since marginal practices foster the disengagement from “certain social and political rituals that have characterized us” might embody resistance and become a counterculture (Espina in Valdés Paz et al., 2001: 83).

What is missing in such analyses is a dialectical analysis of intertwined socio-economic and cultural factors in the constitution of disadvantaged social groups, for which the concept of underclass—as understood by William J. Wilson (1987) and Lash and Urry (1994)—seems to be more useful. Nonetheless, even if there is no acknowledgement of the constitution of an underclass as such, the few studies publicly available on poverty and social inequalities in Cuba have found similar characteristics to those defining an underclass in Wilson’s terms: “residence in a space isolated from other social classes; long-term [male] joblessness; consequentially, female-headed households; absence of training and skills; long spells of poverty and welfare dependency; and a tendency to engage in street crime” (Wilson cited in Lash and Urry 1994: 149). For instance, Zabala (2010) and Espina (2010) have found links between poverty in Cuba and certain “personal and family traits” (Espina 2010: 210) such as: female-headed households, with more children than the mean; low levels of education and employment; precarious housing—usually in “marginal barrios”—overcrowding, along with behaviors connected to “anomie and marginality” (Zabala 2010: 143).

The study of the constitution of a Cuban underclass calls for close attention to the inextricable ties between access to resources, employment and education—and their racialization—with other related processes such as internal migration. The data provided by De la Fuente (2001) and Sawyer (2006) and scholars based in Cuba such as Morales (2007) and Espina (2010) shows blacks’ disadvantages in the job market of the new emergent

economy—tourism and mixed-ventures with foreign capital—and as recipients of remittances from abroad, the two most important sources of hard currency. Espina (2010) also perceives internal migrants as a “vulnerable group” in her account of social disparities in Cuba.²² Illegal rural migrants have been blamed to “transferred to the capital very precarious ways of life” and cause a “ruralisation of the city” (Coyula 2009: 25). Furthermore, since the population of the eastern provinces has a strong Black component, as noted by De la Fuente (2001: 327) internal migration has also become racialized and the “migration of people from the eastern provinces to Havana has been frequently interpreted as a black assault on the city.”

The recognition of an underclass in Cuba is essential to trace the emergence and success of reggaeton, as well as the ultimate reasons for the moral panic it provokes. Criticisms to reggaeton as an expression of “low culture” may disguise a class and racial rejection to the underclass, especially because members of this group were among the first to produce, listen and distribute this music using their networks and resources—e.g. setting up home-based studios. *Bonches* or street parties, street vendors and *bicitaxistas*, usually migrants, along with private taxi drivers or *boteros* constituted an informal distribution network, fundamental for the dissemination of reggaeton in the capital. Moreover, producing reggaeton music has become an alternative source of income for the disenfranchised underclass youth.

Consequently, many reggaeton themes engage with the context of the *barrio* and project the language and values of this group. For the reggaetonero Baby Lores, “the genre comes from marginal barrios and marginal people made it popular”²³ and thus, songs such as “La tuba” by Elvis Manuel—that generated much concern and criticisms within intellectual circles due to its sexual content—refer to that code: “If you get into a marginal *barrio* like Marianao” Lores continues, “you are not going to find something else, and I think that he [Elvis Manuel] is talking as people talk there.”²⁴ Elvis Manuel Martínez himself, who was 17 at the time of the interview and studied to be a mechanic, endorsed this view when he valued his music as rooted in “street culture”:

Since I never went to music school, my thing is the street, I make my songs in the street’s style [. . .] But I’m improving the lyrics so people listen and do not think I only make a prosaic music, as they call it; but this is what young people like, what can we do about it?²⁵

Like many others, the theme “La iyabo de la felpa azul” [The iyabo with the blue scrunchie] (*Etapas Baby Lores & Insurrecto—Vol. II*, Adriano Tota Production, 2010) by Baby Lores and the former rapper Leandro Medina [aka Insurrecto], expresses the concerns of underclass members, who are

usually walking the thin line between legality and illegality in Cuba. The title ingeniously utilizes popular codes to refer to police patrol cars, which are white like the clothes of *iyabós*—people initiated in the Afro-Cuban religion *santería*—and have blue lights on top. In the song, the patrol car is said to “be fond of” not only of “boys with dark skin” but to be after *jinetas* or anyone—no matter if they are “artisans or *ta(r)xi* drivers”—making a “weird movement.” The pronunciation of words in the song also follows the norm of popular sectors.

Two residential areas got united,
El Canal and Romerillo.
If you go around Varadero in
taxis for tourists, be careful with
the Iyabo with the blue scrunchie.
With too many cans in the
Infotur,²⁶ be careful with the
Iyabo with the blue scrunchie.
It is always wearing the same
clothes, it loves dark-skinned boys.
It doesn't matter if you're an
artisan or taxi driver, they catch
you in a weird move and you're
dead.²⁷

Se unieron dos zonas residenciales,
el Canal y el Romerillo.
Si andas en Varadero a golpe de
Tul [turistaxi], cuidado con la
iyabó de la felpa azul.
Con demasiadas latas en el Infotur
[Infotur], cuidado con la iyabó de l
a felpa azul.
Siempre está vestida con la misma
ropita, le encantan los chamacos
de la piel oscurita, no importan si
eres artesano o tarxita [taxista], si
te ven en movimiento raro, te la
aplican.

Today, however, the marginal subjectivity is not exclusively linked to the underclass. The crisis has catalysed its dissemination throughout new spaces and social groups. The complicated pattern of social stratification²⁸ in Cuba means that in many cases there is no direct relation between income and cultural capital or more generally, between the material and the symbolic aspects of class. Thus, for wider sectors of the population that are not necessarily part of the underclass, “marginal” values, and worldviews are more and more appealing. The widespread popularity of reggaeton becomes both an agent and a result of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, the underclass has embraced money-oriented emergent values that challenge socialism. These values are the expression of broader sociocultural change that has found in reggaeton's lyrics and performance their main public scenario. How else, then, are we to understand the frequent allusions to Motorolas, cars, discos, and money in this music?

Indeed, a textual analysis of reggaeton songs reveals the centrality that money has acquired for reggaetoneros and their audiences. References to money, jewelery, beverages, cars, cell phones,²⁹ and other goods are common. There are many references to experiences and goods distant from

Cuban reality—such as jacuzzis, limousines, and designer clothing in “La bailarina del VIP” (*Etapas Baby Lores & Insurrecto & El Chacal*, Adriano Tota Production, 2010) and “La iyabo de la felpa azul” by Baby Lores and Insurrecto—that construct a consumer world that is usually far from reach in Cuba. “Viajar afuera,” travelling abroad is another topic appearing in the lyrics. There are many references to love relationships with foreigners through which travel is accomplished. Likewise, video clips reinforce these discourses by showing reggaetoneros in fancy cars, clothes, and jewellery—*bling bling*—with women styled in such a glossy manner that it makes you wonder if the video is Cuban at all. Reggaeton places are also spaces for conspicuous consumption as a manner of symbolizing status, and thus, global brand beverages, clothes, and technology are commonly on display in such crowds.

Again, these topics are not new in Cuban popular music. Both Moore (2006) and Perna (2005) have analyzed the relationship between the rise of timba and the socio-economical crisis of the 1990s. For Moore (2006: 133), “timba manifests a rejection on the part of younger Cubans of socialist rhetoric; its repertoire embraces sensuality, hedonism, and materialism.” According to Perna, timba represented, in fact the sound of that crisis:

Through its lyrics, musical style, models of behaviour and closeness to street culture, timba articulates the values of a largely Black youth subculture that has grown up in the shadow of the crisis, revealing the disorientation of Cuban society at the beginning of the new millennium, and ultimately symbolizing the difficult, contradictory opening of Cuba to the outside world. [. . .] In a sense timba represents Cuban society’s bad conscience, embodying many of the things that its cultural and political establishment would not like to see and to be seen (Perna 2005: 4).

Most reggaeton songs do not engage directly with dominant ideology, as noted by Baker (2009); however, this does not mean it is beyond the political realm. Actually, consumerism is a symbolic construct of late capitalism and the enthusiasm with which reggaetoneros embrace it fractures the dominant ideology of the Revolution. According to Katherine Verdery (1996: 29), in the context of Eastern European socialist regimes, “consumption of goods and objects conferred an identity that set you off from socialism.” If socialist economies are “economies of shortage” that produce “scarcity” (Verdere 1996: 42), consumption, and specially conspicuous consumption, in socialist societies acquire political connotations.³⁰ Similar to Hebdige’s reading of the mods in Britain, “the fetishization of expensive and highly desirable commodities” (Bennett 2001: 19) in reggaeton also symbolized an emphasis on leisure time. In the Cuban context, such emphasis opposes

to the exegesis of work in socialist ideology as the only true source of individual fulfilment.

Then, reggaeton constructs a space of resistance in which the desires of the underclass and other sectors are symbolically projected and celebrated. Raquel R. Rivera sustained that “the Cuban authorities are upset for the same reasons as those in other countries: reggaeton tends to be hypersexual and glorify consumerism and fashion” (cited in Cubaencuentro 2009). However, in a context where official ideology is calling the population to make sacrifices and resist scarcity, this discourse acquires particular challenging social connotations.

Hypersexuality and (Lack of) Control: Love Relationships as Portrayed in Reggaeton

The discourses of popular music have named and reflected on the new realities and the social changes experienced in the last two decades in the country. Although reggaeton usually lacks the explicit social or political motivation of genres such as *trova* and hip-hop, its discourses do participate in the interpretation of social change. This section illustrates, precisely, how reggaeton, a music genre produced mostly by men, deals with the tensions that global sex tourism has caused to Cuban manhood.

Nieves Moreno has observed that “the reggaeton man or barriocentric macho emerges from an exaggerated heterosexual masculinity that, in an immediate way, suggests fissures” (Nieves Moreno 2009: 256). In that sense, when listening to this music, it is almost impossible to fail to notice the marks of a hegemonic model of masculinity (Connell 1995) and the anxieties of reggaetoneros dealing with a changed environment, trying to adapt and maintain women “under control.” More broadly, these narratives point to the shifting nature of power and dominance in sex and gender relations under the influence of global sex tourism and crisis (Pruitt and LaFont 1993).

Since reggaeton carries a strong presence of Black musical forms (Marshall 2009), “an amplified and exaggerated masculinity” and a “conflictual representation of sexuality” (Gilroy 1993: 83, 85), described by Gilroy as components of the way race is lived in the Black Atlantic diaspora, are common elements found in the genre. Nevertheless, these elements are not exclusive to Black musics. Heavy metal has been also discussed in terms of “its aggressive expression of male sexuality” (Frith and McRobbie 1990: 319). Male bonding and the “threat” posed by women are central issues in such style too (Frith and McRobbie 1990; Bennett 2001: 49). Similarly, many reggaeton songs boast about reggaetoneros “hypersexuality” (Nieves Moreno 2009) and others express male anxiety about their control of women and their relationships—“Soy tu dueño” [I’m your owner] by

Eddy K (*Llegaron los salvajes*, Ahí na'má, 2004); "Tú no te gobiernas" [You don't govern yourself] by Los Cuatro (*Escucha lo que traje*, Planet Record, 2009), and many others. Live shows reinforce such messages with an emphasis on images of male success—accomplished through clothes from global fashion brands, bling-bling, and other expensive accessories such as designer sunglasses—a boastful style and stage interactions with women fans that assert their control over female sexuality—for instance, through dance competitions (Fig. 2).

Women's behavior is both desired and derided, a phallogentric pattern, common in Cuban popular music (Casanelas 2004; Fairley 2004: 90). Female sexuality is subjected to double standards: sometimes negatively perceived as "loose"—Gente de Zona's "Le gustan los artistas" [She likes artists] and "Yo te enseñé" [I taught you] both from the album *Lo mejor que suena ahora V 2.0* (Planet Records, 2008); others, celebrated for being available and seductive—"La chica modelo" [The model] (*Etapas Baby Lores & Insurrecto—Vol. II*, Adriano Tota Production, 2010) and "Se va de control" [She is out of control] by Baby Lores and El Chacal (*Etapas Baby Lores & Chacal*, Eureka '90 Scarl Adriano Tota Production, 2010).

Male codes of "honour" that prioritize male friendships over romantic affairs—and thus, present women as secondary—are the themes of songs

FIGURE 2. Gente de Zona's singer Alexander judging an improvised doggy-style dance competition (PHOTO: NORA GÁMEZ TORRES, 2007).



such as “Déjala ir” [Let her go] (*Etapas Baby Lores & Insurrecto—Vol. 1*, Eureka '90 Scarl, Adriano Tota Production, 2010) by Baby Lores and Insurrecto and “Me da tremenda pena” [I'm so sorry] (*Reggaeton Summer 2008 Vol. 1*, Feyr 2008), by Gente de Zona. More interesting, though, is the way reggaetoneros are reacting to the increasingly secondary role of Cuban men in some sexual markets in which foreigners and their “qualities”—such as money, goods, and the possibilities of a visa—are more attractive, and the contradictory empowerment this gives to some women.

Fairley (2004: 92) has made a similar point in relation to timba. She further suggested that women's body in timba dancing “could be read symbolically as ‘the convertible currency’” of the Special Period (2009: 282). Comparable uses of gendered “capitals” in processes of social mobility (Anthias 2001)³¹ have been described all over the Caribbean, where sexuality is interwoven with economics and women—and men—have used sex as an asset to resist poverty and exclusion from the global economy (Kempadoo 2004). Although such views acknowledge the unequal power relations involved in prostitution, they challenge the total victimization of women. This is particularly relevant in the Cuban case, in which “women may feel empowered by their sexual work” due to their access to money and the spaces of the market economy, despite the fact of being, at the same time, “commodities” in the global sex market (Cabezas 2004: 113).

Popular music has rendered men's reactions to such changes. Hernandez-Reguant (2009: 85) has also noted that

Timba, more so than rap, and like reggaeton years later, typically situated black male sexuality at the epicentre of a new society structured by access to both women and hard currency, redefining black male sexuality in cultural but also racial and sexual terms.

Seen in this context, the highly controversial timba song “La bruja” [The witch] by NG La banda—that was heavily criticized for “damaging” the image of the Cuban women—is not so much about women in general as about women's threatening behavior to (Black) male identity:

You think you are the best, you
think you are an artist, because
you ride around Buenavista³²
in a Turistaxi,³³ looking for the
impossible because I am not with
you.

Tú te crees la mejor, te crees una
artista porque vas en turistaxi por
Buenavista, buscando lo imposible
porque a ti también te falto yo.

You exchanged my love for cheap
amusement and the price of the
spirit cannot be auctioned.
That is why I compare you with a
witch.³⁴

Tú cambiaste mi amor por
diversiones baratas, y el precio del
espíritu no se subasta, por eso te
comparo con una bruja.

Its author, the polemic musician José Luis Cortés, recalls why he composed it:

This happens to be a real song . . . a chick I had, that was a dancer in the cabaret *Caribe* told me: 'damn it, negro, you know there is a Puerto Rican that is going to show me a good time, so I love you very much but this is it;³⁵ and then I did this song to her, I did not attack any woman, it was just an experience.³⁶

The reggaeton group Gente de Zona echoed this problematic in "La palestina"³⁷ [The Palestinian], a song about a woman from Oriente. It is suggested she is a jinetera as well, due to the references to obtaining a visa [luchar la visa], the clothes and jewellery she uses and the way money "transformed her":

When I met her in Oriente, she
was yelling nice things to me and
then I found her in Havana acting
full of herself.
I don't know if it was the good
jewellery or the good clothing,
I'm not happy about her attitude
because she said 'do not berate.'
It is an everyday story and I will
tell it all to you: the Palestinian
girl is not Cuban anymore, she has
money, and she is going away.
The Palestinian girl has money
and she is not a nobody anymore.
The Palestinian girl strived for her
visa and she is going away.
Hey, she deceived me, she said
she loved me and the money
transformed her [. . .]
How little that woman loved me,
she came to Havana and her life
changed.

Cuando yo la vi en Oriente, ella me
gritaba cosas hermosas y después
la encontré en La Habana y se está
creyendo cosas.
No sé si eran las buenas prendas,
no sé si era la vestimenta, no estoy
contento con su actitud porque me
dijo 'no te reprendas'.
Es una historia muy cotidiana y te la
voy a contar entera: la palestina ya
no es cubana, tiene dinero y se va pa'
fuera.
La palestina tiene dinero y ya no es
cualquiera, la palestina luchó la visa y
se va pa' fuera

Ay, ella me engaño, ella me dijo que
me quería y el dinero la transformó
[. . .]
Esa mujer, que poco me quería, vino
pa' la Habana y le cambio la vida.

She treated me badly; see what disregard!

I'm Gente de Zona and I'm still alive.

Hey, how little that woman loved me; she exchanged me for money and a visa.

Now she wants to be with me but that takes a process.

Remember that day at the embassy, while walking [. . .], you said laughing, 'go away'.

The Palestinian girl is living it up [. . .]

Now she comes to see me because I'm on top, she wants to apologize and to have me on her side.

Don't be upset, mami, but I'm on top.³⁸

Me trató muy mal, mira que descortesía.

Yo soy Gente de Zona y estoy vivo todavía.

Ay, que poco me quería, me cambió por piticlines³⁹ y una visa.

Ahora quiere estar conmigo y eso lleva su proceso.

Recuerda aquel día en la embajada caminando [. . .], con tremenda risa me dijiste 'vete echando'

La palestina está acabando [. . .]

Ahora viene a verme porque estoy manda'o, quiere disculparse y que esté a su lado.

No te pongas brava, mami, pero estoy pega'o.

Here the male/reggaetonero complains about how woman's love was corrupted by money and the possibilities of travelling abroad. Her arrogant attitude is seen as a sign of disrespect to him ("she treated me badly, see what disregard!"). This time, the way to claim back the respect and the attention of the woman, the male's main asset, is precisely to be a successful reggaetonero, who also has what she desires: money and success. Even if reggaetoneros criticize her, they also acknowledge that it is precisely money that makes her "somebody": "The Palestinian has money and she is not a nobody anymore."⁴⁰

In fact, a closer look at timba and reggaeton reveals that composers of both genres have an ambivalent attitude about the role of money and its mediation of love relationships. In her study of sex work in Cuba, Gisela Fosado (2005: 65) also observed that "money has taken an increasingly large role in culturally specific narratives regarding love." In timba songs like "El temba"⁴¹ (*Pa' que se entere la Habana*, Magic Music, 1996) and "El bony" [The cutie] (*Soy cubano, soy popular*, EGREM, 2003) by La Charanga Habanera there is a reinforcement of the view of men as provider and an open recognition of money as the central capital to attract women. Thus in "El temba," women are told to "look for a sugar daddy" so they can "have [money, goods] and enjoy."⁴² In "El bony," the young and attractive singer Evlis Valdivia who impersonates the character in the song acknowledges that he can be cute but without money, his attractiveness is not worth much.⁴³

A decade later, reggaeton seems to affirm the opposite. Other reggaeton songs, such as "Efi Efo"⁴⁴ and "El tatuaje" [The tattoo] by Baby Lores and El

Insurrecto, appeal to the same myth of Black sexuality that attracts those same tourists they are competing with, as the main capital to seduce Cuban women. “Efi Efo” again refers to a *jinetera* who likes to show off her status, acquired through a relationship with a European man. The voice of reggaetoneros is situated outside the story and with both disdain and satisfaction note how, despite all her “success,” she is still dependent on a Cuban Black men, who exploits her:

How she likes to act crazy,
showing off on Havana streets.

She thinks because she has the
ball,⁴⁵ she is gonna do what she
wants.

She has her Pepe,⁴⁶ her mobile,
her jewelery and a house in East
Havana,⁴⁷

but she is bragging about it and
I know her from the times she
didn't have a dime.

Everyone [drinking] Bucanero⁴⁸
and she Bavaria [and smoking],
Popular⁴⁹ with filters,

She has a millionaire's attitude;
her chauffeur waits for her at the
disco's entrance.

Last night, I was told from good
sources that besides the foreigner,
she has another boy with my skin
color that has her under his finger
and takes her money away.

Don't brag about your bank
account, all your life you were
broke.

Now because you married a white
man, when you are fan of niggers.
Everything, everything that the
European guy gives you the tough
guy controls.

That is why you are under his
finger, mi Chinese⁵⁰ girl, you are a
daughter of misfortune.⁵¹

Cómo le gusta hacerse la loca,
especulando por las calles de La
Habana.

Se cree que porque tiene la pelota, va
a hacer lo que le da la gana.

Tiene su Pepe, tiene su móvil, su
prenda y un gao en la Habana del
Este,

pero se me está haciendo y yo la
conozco de cuando no tenía ni este
[. . .]

To' el mundo Bucanero y ella Bavaria
[. . .] popular con filtro.

Tiene se aire de millonaria, su chofer
la espera en la puerta de la disco.

Anoche me dijeron de buena tinta
que aparte del extranjero, hay otro
chamaquito de mi pinta que le pone
el dedo y le quita el dinero [. . .]

No te estés haciendo la de la cuenta
del banco toda tu vida siempre
fuiste una palmiche, ahora porque
te casaste con el blanco, si tú eres
fanática a los niches.

Todo, todo lo que te regale el europeo
te lo tiene controlado el guapo, por
eso es que te tiene puesto el dedo.
Mi china, la verdad que tu eres hija
del maltrato.

In “El tatuaje” by Baby Lores and El Insurrecto, the male voice, in first person, proclaims his superior sexual and romantic skills when compared to the foreign boyfriend of the girl with whom he also has relations. Whitfield (2008: 93) has found in the literature of the Special Period a similar narrative on *jineterismo* in which foreigners appear as “recognizable stereotypes who compare unfavourably, in every regard other than in material wealth, to their Cuban partners.” They are portrayed as “mediocre lovers who make their wives long for the assured machismo of Cuban men” (2008: 93). Likewise, in the song there is an insistence on the persuasive nature of Cuban male sexuality, to the point that the girl of the story wants to break her engagement with her foreign boyfriend and tattoo the name of his Cuban lover on his body, a symbol of the Cuban male’s dominance:

I'm sure you don't give her what I do [. . .]	Estoy seguro que usted no le da lo que yo le doy[. . .]
Just by kissing her, her honey overflows.	Solo con besarla, le desborda la miel.
I'm the one who sings her love songs and she gets goose bumps.	Soy el que le canta canciones de amor y le eriza la piel.
I have ten missed calls in my cell phone	Tengo diez llamadas perdidas en mi celular
from the girl who says she is not getting married.	de la chica aquella que dice que no se va a casar.
Yesterday I made love to her, today I already saw her cry,	Ayer le hice el amor, hoy ya la vi llorar,
she said tomorrow she is getting a tattoo with my initials.	dice que mañana va a hacerse un tatuaje con mi inicial.
Since I first met her, I realized she was not happy	Desde que la conocí me di cuenta que no era feliz
because the yuma, ⁵² the money, the house, the jewellery, and the Audi are not everything [. . .]	y es que todo no es el yuma, el dinero, la casa, la prenda y el Audi [. . .]
I remember that night we slept together	Recuerdo que esa noche dormimos juntitos
and the next morning she wanted to break up with the guy. ⁵³	y al otro día la nena ya quería pelearse del tipo.

These stories resonate with the dynamics of the Havana reggaeton scene, in which it is common for reggaetoneros to be economically supported either by foreign girlfriends or by Cuban “sugar mummies,” usually married to foreigners. Through informal conversations with members of the scene,

I learned that various reggaetoneros have received expensive cars as presents from their lovers. These attitudes extend beyond the reggaeton scene, and it is not uncommon to listen to conversations in which men from the popular sectors refer to look for women “que la aporten” or “que tengan balas,” both expressions alluding to women as providers.

By the end of 2011, the emergence of the reggaetonera and ex-model Patry White, a.k.a. La Dictadora [The dictator], comes to illustrate the tensions between female empowerment and the model of masculinity reproduced in reggaeton. Her artistic name is a direct reminder of her alleged power status, also reinforced by other economic symbols such as the black Toyota Camry she owns—one of the few in the country. At the same time, she seems to inhabit the established places for women in the genre: a desirable sexual object and a sugar mummy. The video clip of her song “Abran paso” [Make way] shows her in various photo sessions posing as a model. In one of these, she and two black male models appear barely covered with bullets while holding guns. The chorus reads: “Si quieres tomar, yo te doy pa’ tomes, si quieres fumar yo te doy pa’ que fumes, si quieres bailar yo te doy pa’ que bailes” [If you want to drink, I will give you (money) for the drinks; if you want to smoke, I will give you (money) for it; if you want to go dancing, I will give you (money) so you can to do it].⁵⁴

Deborah Pruitt and Suzanne LaFont (1993) have studied how Jamaican men exploit a cultural construction of their sexuality associated with the Rasta identity to attract Western women. Katrin Hansing (2001) has spotted a similar behavior in Cuba. In the same fashion, in reggaeton’s lyrics, male hypersexuality becomes the capital that might keep Cuban women at home. In so doing, reggaeton provides Cuban males with symbolic resources (stories of success and prevail) to negotiate their disadvantage in romantic relationships and come to terms with their masculinity in a changing context.

Aceite vs. Agua, mikis vs. repas: distinction in the reggaeton scene

Although reggaeton developed within the peripheral networks and spaces of the underclass, its appeal now crosses class and race boundaries. Furthermore, the reggaeton scene has become the scenario of symbolic struggles for class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) and the display of new sociocultural identities embodied in labels such as *mikis* and *repas*, *agua* [water] and *aceite* [oil], which I explored in different venues and crowds.⁵⁵

After chasing Eduardo Mora—the leader of Eddy K, ex-rapper and reggaeton pioneer⁵⁶—for two weeks, he finally agreed to meet me in the lobby of the Habana Libre hotel at 1:00 am. At the entrance of the bar Las Cañitas, where he was about to perform, a poster announced the compere of the show who called himself “Uncle Oil.” Then, the doorman explained to me

the meaning/uses of the terms *agua* and *aceite*. He, like the *compere*, was *aceite* because “oil always goes to the top” and “does not mix with water.”

Thus the distinction between oil and water not only denotes the unequal incomes among those who can afford or not to attend a reggaeton show in a hard currency venue, but converts such inequality into a source of social differentiation and status. In the 1990s, philosopher Fernando Martínez Heredia (2002: 141),⁵⁷ claimed that despite the deep differentiation of incomes, emergent groups with high incomes—*jineteras*, those involved in a variety of informal activities, those receiving remittances or positioned in the emergent sectors of the economy, among others—were still far from obtaining “social legitimacy.” However, the colonization of the reggaeton scene as a public space for social distinction and the very popularity of this genre, in which many of the emergent values associated with such groups acquire a central position, suggest that for significant sectors of society, social status is attached to the possession of money and goods. A similar process has been described during the *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, where money was seen to emerge “as the fundamental basis for social roles and statuses” (Cushman 1995: 244). The fact that this kind of social legitimacy is not linked to the public space construed within state institutions is not a sign of its unimportance but of the increasing divorce between formal and informal social practices in contemporary Cuba.

The labels *mikis* and *repas*, although based on economic differences as well, convey more defined identity markers. Thus, in the reggaeton disco scene, economic capital not only determines access and consumption but is symbolized through specific identities. The word *mikis* comes from Mickey Mouse and implies the adoption of foreign—mainly US—aesthetics and the consumption of foreign culture and goods. Thus, *mikis*, young people with access to hard currency from various sources, use designer and global clothing brands, and technological gadgets such as iPods or cell phones; women wear a lot of makeup, fancy haircuts and high heels (see fig. 3). In that sense, *mikis*, such as many reggaetoneros, insert themselves into global fashion and consumer trends, usually associated with the images of postmodern trans-Latin identities. Broadly speaking it might be said that the construction of “global” identities through reggaeton can be also read as a projection of the desired world of commodities banned to most Cubans.

These marks of distinction have also become racialized; hence, *mikis* are associated with more-educated whites while blacks and *mestizos* are the majority among the *repas* or people from the *repartos*, which are peripheral neighborhoods in Havana. In this code, *repas* becomes the denomination of the reggaeton audiences associated with the underclass.

In her study of club cultures in Britain, Sarah Thornton (1995) has found similar cultural hierarchies at work grounded in subcultural ideologies that are “means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups,



FIGURE 3. *Mikis at the bar Las Cañitas, Habana Libre Hotel*
(PHOTO: NORA GÁMEZ TORRES, 2007).

assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass" (1995: 9). However, there are some significant differences in the Cuban case. For example, while the distinction between mikis and repas primarily works within youth cultures, the one between oil and water does not, in the sense that is a primarily economic distinction that might be used to describe individuals of any age group. In that sense, the reggaeton disco scene cannot be conceived as exclusively young nor do the distinctions at work entail a fantasy of classlessness as the ones examined by Thornton (1995: 12).

The audiences in the Havana reggaeton disco scene do not fit the model of "neo-tribes" either. I agree with Andy Bennett (2004b: 132) that youth spaces, such as discos and bars, "become sites in which young people can collectively act out and refine consumption-based lifestyle projects." However, I cannot see how a "consumption-based lifestyle project" can be disentangled from class belonging, as suggested in his definition of neo-tribes as

a means of understanding the collective practices of youth grounded in consumer sensibilities such as musical taste, fashion sense and leisure preference . . . in which issues of class, gender and background are no longer the restrictive elements they once were' (Bennett 2004b: 132).

A further element corroborating my argument is the fact that while a shared taste in music may play a significant role bringing together the members of the reggaeton scene in Havana, the dynamics of symbolic distinction themselves are often paramount. For some, music consumption becomes secondary and the consumption of the place itself turns into the most salient sign of distinction, as suggested by Palacios:

Many people go to El Capri to see and be seen; they like other people saying “look, I saw so-and-so last night at Los Cuatro’s concert.” They are not really interested in who is performing; they just want to be seen in a place with a high entrance fee.⁵⁸

Reggaetoneros are not simply outsiders in this dynamic of symbolic distinction. While successful groups work to keep their larger audiences⁵⁹—producing songs such as “El animal” [The animal] by Gente de Zona or “Si se va a formar, que se forme” [If you are going to kick up a fuss, do it] by Los Cuatro (*Intocables*, Vol. II, Independent Production, 2009), which appeal to their grassroots audiences, and especially to the “macho barriocéntrico” or “guapo”—many song stories are placed in the context of the disco or refer to typical subjects in its crowds: “La chica modelo” and “La bailarina del VIP” by Baby Lores and Insurrecto; “La Palestina” and “Le gustan los artistas” by Gente de Zona.

The adjustment of reggaeton to the disco and its publics—jineteras, tourists, mikis, and aceites—expresses the pressures to succeed in scenes that also provide them with big earnings in hard currency. Since for reggaetoneros performance is the means of achieving economic self-sufficiency, they are most interested in attracting the right type of public: those who can afford the covers in CUC and who will not become a problem in the hotels disco circuit. Baby Lores elaborates further on this issue:

I pull off the mikis, who like pop and are into reggaeton, but who tend to get into the lyrics more [. . .] I think that depends on the texts. Eddy K has a more repa public, although he is trying to be more polished because it is not that the repa public has no rights, but it limits you in relation to the covers [entrance fees] [. . .] Someone living in a marginal barrio cannot easily pay 10, 15 dollars [. . .] It is also limiting because the repa public gets aggressive [se calienta]. Then in a hotel, in El Capri, if you step on his foot and he already has had three beers, then he comes at you. . . . The miki, instead, thinks twice and apologizes.⁶⁰

Following the account of Palacios, lyrics are central strategies for the segmentation and the appeal to specific publics, which is taken into account when arranging the program of the night. Performers also reinforce the



FIGURE 4. *Baby Lores, interview at the Habana Libre Hotel*
(PHOTO: NORA GÁMEZ TORRES, 2007).

distinction between mikis and repas to appeal, reward and keep their public in many ways. When advertising one of their shows, Alexander Delgado, director and main vocalist of *Gente de Zona* underlined the exclusiveness of the show, with tickets to be sold in advance in order to avoid queues and conflicts [*perreta*] and destined to a public he defined as “protocol, mikis, and aceites.” Paying 20 CUC, he assures, would avoid being “disturbed” by someone “touching your woman” and thus, guarantee the “right” type of entertainment’s experience.⁶¹

At the same time, reggaetoneros are aware of their need to keep their popular base. Palacios’s theory of how reggaeton spreads in the city is also an important testimony to reggaetoneros’ awareness of the social aspects of their music:

If you become popular [*si te pegas*] among the *agua*, you later become popular among *aceites*. If a person plays a cassette at home, the whole *barrio* will listen to it; from there, it will spread as an epidemic. Nobody

becomes popular from Miramar⁶², when it reaches Miramar, it is because everyone is singing it [. . .] There are indeed groups that specialized a bit in doing songs for that type of public, “La bailarina del VIP”, “La palestina,” some songs for the *farándula*, but the way you really become popular, is if you shape your work to street taste. The thermometer of popularity is that a 10 [Cuban] peso taxi plays your music, or if someone from the barrio is singing it.⁶³

Conclusions

Reggaeton emerged close to socially, economically, and politically marginalized youth, mainly Black, but in contrast to hip-hop and despite media censorship, it has reached massive popularity due to its wide circulation within underground networks. Reggaeton is the opposite of committed hip-hop. Whereas rap conveys explicit political content, reggaeton—just as timba before—“is more about contesting cultural hegemony” (Perna 2005: 5). Its celebration of sex, consumerism and fun, along with its catchy rhythm, allowed it to triumph first within the underclass, which saw their language, values and lives projected and reinforced in this genre. Probably, this last fact lies behind the heated criticisms coming from intellectual circles.

It would be misleading to disregard reggaeton for its perceived superficiality. Beyond the bling bling, reggaeton lyrics engage in complex processes of interpretation, negotiation, and understanding of social change, as experienced through love relationships, for instance. The hyperbolic depiction of male sexuality commonly found in its lyrics is related, in the Cuban case, with the changing politics of gender and romantic relationships in times of crisis and transition.

Despite the fact that the emergence of reggaeton is tightly connected to a Cuban underclass, the ethnographic work presented here reveals that the concepts of subculture and neo-tribes do not comfortably account for the practices of class distinction crossing the scene. The case of reggaeton exemplifies the complexity and fluidity of certain musical genres, which are able to articulate and project the values of more than one class. While the “fluid boundaries” of reggaeton contradicts the image of “tight coherent subcultures” (Bennett 2001: 21), my analysis also underscores the centrality of class in the constitution of this scene. The various class elements underpinning the reggaeton scene further contradict dominant ideology propagating an image of a “classless” society.

Reggaetoneros should be considered as knowledgeable subjects capable of understanding and exploiting these operational distinctions in their interest. The current process of Cubanization of reggaeton also points to their intention to push the boundaries of the legitimate national culture, with the additional benefits in terms of access to the media and state support.

At the deepest level, though, reggaeton constitutes a challenge for the dominant ideology, probably even more than hip-hop, since the latter never acquired reggaeton's massive popularity. The most problematic feature of reggaeton, from the dominant ideology point of view, is not the vulgar language but the way in which the underclass has managed to break into the cultural sphere without permission. It is not only the fact that the state and its cultural institutions can no longer monopolize the sphere of production and distribution—a case widely proven by reggaeton—but, most importantly, that values such as consumerism proclaimed in this music have gone mainstream. Reggaeton makes visible the existence of a sociopolitical subject that does not fit the requirements of the “New Man” or revolutionary subject. In that sense, reggaeton poses a challenge to the dominant ideology and its symbolic control over the construction of reality, over the construction of identities and the “right,” “correct” values in an allegedly socialist society.

In ex-Soviet republics, consumerism has been linked to a mental template that favors adaptation to transition (Vihalemm and Kalmus, 2008), and this is the last point I want to make. What reggaeton reveals dramatically is what the state precisely wants to conceal, that in everyday life, socialist values have lost considerable space and that people have started to adjust their mentalities to the kind of post-socialist economy we have had for the past two decades.

Notes

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1. Juan Formell, personal interview, January 23, 2008.
2. Miguel Barnet, intervention at the Seminar “Popular music and contemporary Cuban society,” Fernando Ortiz Foundation, October 23, 2007. Barnet is a well-known writer who is now the president of UNEAC.
3. This explanation was also supported by musician and music producer Frank Palacios, personal interview, September 21, 2009.
4. Guille Vilar's intervention at the Seminar “Popular Music and contemporary Cuban society,” Fernando Ortiz Foundation, October 23, 2007.

5. See for example songs by Los Tres Gatos transcribed in the CIDMUC report.
6. Jose Luis Cortés, personal interview, December 3, 2007.
7. With titles such as “Prohibido el reggaeton” [Forbidden reggaeton] (Oviedo 2005) or “Cerveza, pollo y perreo” [Beer, chicken and doggy style] (Martinez 2009).
8. Alpidio Alonso, the president of the AHS was quoted by Oviedo (2005) warning to be careful with “so much regrettable reggaeton” in the Eighth Congress of the Union of Young Communists in 2005.
9. For example, according to a study carried out by the CIDMUC between 2003 and 2004, Cuban reggaeton only accounted for 2.8% of the music transmitted by one radio show on one radio station among a survey of three major radio stations and 7 radio shows (CIDMUC 2005: 70).
10. Guille Vilar, personal interview, November 14, 2007.
11. José Luis Cortés, personal interview, December 3, 2007.
12. David Calzado, personal interview, January 14, 2008.
13. *Idem*.
14. It was formed by ex-members of Eddy K after Eduardo Mora decided to stay in Miami.
15. Frank Palacios, personal interview, September 21, 2009.
16. *Idem*.
17. David Calzado, personal interview, January 14, 2008.
18. A system of artistic agencies controlled by the Ministry of Culture agencies provide musicians with work permits, travel documents, and permissions to tour abroad. Access to these agencies has become a major obstacle for amateur musicians such as reggaetoneros since they are designed to represent musicians formed in the state musical schools. In addition, the state controls most performing venues and the access to legally work as a musician, the “official” record companies and the mass media.
19. Frank Palacios, personal interview, September 21, 2009.
20. A behavioral understanding of the concept emphasising issues of culture, values and conduct (Murray 1990) has been associated with new right discourses on poverty and the stigmatization of certain social groups on sexual, racial and class basis (Reed 1990; Westergaard 1992). I follow other authors who find this concept valuable inasmuch as it underscores new structural patterns of poverty and stratification (Robinson and Gregson 1992; Lash and Urry 1994; Buckingham 1999), which is the point I want to make in the Cuban case.
21. Official data can underplay the real extent of poverty and inequality in the country. This 20% was calculated taking household incomes under 50 Cuban pesos—2 US dollars—which depending on the size of the family would not be even sufficient to pay for the rationed food. The poverty line is also associated with precarious housing and unemployment (Zabala 2010). If we take into account that rationed food only provides for 50% of intake needs according to Espina (2010: 193) and that other necessities such as clothing can only be satisfied in the free markets or shops in hard currency, it is not difficult to see that this poverty line is rather an “extreme poverty” line. Other conclusions of Cuban scholars should be also taken cautiously. For example, Espina refers to have found a distance of 28 points between the highest and lowest monthly per capita income in Havana, in a qualitative study

carried out in 2002 (Espina 2004; 2010). However, the real distance she found was 200 points but she discarded this figure because she considered that the highest income found (7266 Cuban pesos or 302 CUC) was “probably an infrequent case” (Espina 2010: 191). If the study was qualitative in the first place, it is hard to see how this type of conclusion based on probabilities could be reached, but it seems less conflictive to report 28 points than 200.

22. The Special Period pressed people to move from the most disadvantaged areas of the countryside, to try to find jobs and cope with the crisis, which hit rural areas even harder than Havana. Salaries in Cuban pesos are lower in provinces such as Guantánamo and Las Tunas (ONE 2009). Uriarte-Gastón (2004) also reports that around 100 000 sugar workers became unemployed due to the restructuring of that industry in 2001. Migration is also the result of long-term uneven urban development and migrants from other cities come to enjoy the relatively better facilities found in Havana (Valdes Paz et al., 2001). As De la Fuente (2001: 328) contends, “internal migrations are a function of the uneven development of the dollar economy in different regions of the country.” This same author estimates that “50,000 people moved to Havana in 1996 alone and that in the first half of 1997, 92,000 people tried to legalize their status in the city” (2001: 328). Although the government put into place the Decree 217 in 1997 this was insufficient to stop these movements.

23. Baby Lores, personal interview, December 3, 2007.

24. Idem.

25. Elvis Manuel, personal interview, December 8, 2007.

26. Originally, Infoturs were created as information offices for tourists. They later became cafeterias.

27. Baby Lores and Insurrecto, “La iyabo de la felpa azul,” *Etapas Baby Lores & Insurrecto—Vol. II* (Adriano Tota Production, 2010).

28. Some scholars have noted the existence of an inverted pyramid of social stratification in Cuba, where low-skill jobs or even informal ones generate more income than professional jobs (Espina 2010). Furthermore, a job cannot be used to predict income levels since there are many other sources of income, from remittances to the informal economy. Thus, income cannot be used as a predictor of education or cultural capital either.

29. Cell phones are a particular sign of consumerism. Before all Cubans were allowed to buy mobiles lines directly in 2008, only Cubans with second nationalities or foreign nationals based in the country were allowed to rent phone lines. In 2007, the price of renting a mobile phone line was 120 CUC, now it is 40 CUC, but it is still overpriced in relation to state paid salaries.

30. In contrast to the Soviet Union, where Western goods could only be found in black markets, in Cuba they are available through state-owned hard currency stores, making state’s messages of austerity and equality even more hypocritical.

31. “. . . where the market place requires sexual attributes, ranging from explicit sexual services like prostitution or surrogacy, to personality traits or physical traits, then gendered characteristics may sit with education or technical skills, i.e. as resources which individuals can bring to the market-place and use for determining their life chances” (Anthias 2001: 385).

32. A popular neighbourhood in the Havana’s district of Marianao.

33. A taxi company for tourists.
34. NG La banda, *La Bruja, La Bruja* (BisMusic, 1995).
35. In Spanish, he used the slang phrase “tu maletín,” literally translated as “your suitcase” but meaning “that is your problem, I’m done.”
36. José Luis Cortés, personal interview, December 3, 2007.
37. A racist discourse names migrants from the eastern provinces, who usually come with little to live in marginal barrios, as Palestinians.
38. *Piticlínes*, slang for money.
39. Gente de Zona, *La palestina, Lo mejor que suena ahora* V 2.0 (Planet Records, 2008).
40. Idem.
41. Sugar daddy but the word also implies it should be a mature man although not necessarily foreign.
42. Charanga Habanera, *El temba, Pa’ que se entere la Habana* (Magic Music, 1996).
43. The chorus reads in Spanish slang: “El bony está pasmado, el bony está palmiche; el bony es una pasta mami, pero pasmao pa’ qué te sirve.”
44. A code from *Abakua*, an all-male, secretive, religion.
45. In Cuban slang, to have the ball [tener la pelota] means to have money.
46. “Pepe,” a foreign man, usually Spaniard.
47. East Havana is the area with beaches.
48. A local beer brand, only sold in CUC.
49. A local brand of cigarettes only sold in CUC.
50. “Mi china” is a colloquial way to address a woman.
51. Baby Lores and Insurrecto, *Efi Efo, Etapa Baby Lores & Insurrecto—Vol. I* (Adriano Tota Production, 2010).
52. Yuma, slang for foreigner, tourist.
53. Baby Lores and Insurrecto (Clan 537), *El Tatuaje, Había una Vez . . . La Caperucita* (Sunflower Publishing, 2008).
54. Patry White, La Dictadora. Abran paso, Cuban Flow, Lo + pegado del momento (Independent compilation, 2011).
55. For example, at Sala Atril, in Gente de Zona’s show at the Hotel Capri; in the live performance of Eddy K—also featuring Baby Lores and El Chacal—at the bar “Las Cañitas” in the Habana Libre hotel, and in the disco La Macumba, in the performance of Los Cuatro.
56. He left the country to live in Miami. The rest of Eddy K formed a new group under the names of Los Salvajes, and finally Los Cuatro.
57. The essay “In the furnace of the nineties” was written in 1998.
58. Frank Palacios, personal interview, September 21, 2009.
59. See for example the opening fragment of “El Animal” by Gente de Zona in which they claim they come from the barrio and they are themselves “the people”.
60. Baby Lores, personal interview, December 3, 2007.
61. Underground recording of a live show, undated.
62. An elegant neighbourhood in Havana, where most embassies and foreign companies’ offices are based.
63. Frank Palacios, personal interview, September 21, 2009.

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